

Improving school attendance by enhancing communication among stakeholders:

Establishment of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA)

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Introduction

The newly established International Network for School Attendance (INSA) works to promote school attendance, reduce absenteeism, and resolve school attendance problems (SAPs). Our motivation for establishing INSA stems from the knowledge that school attendance offers innumerable benefits to children and adolescents (hereafter referred to as youth) and that sub-optimal attendance holds many liabilities.

The importance of school attendance will be obvious to readers of this journal. School environments can positively influence youths' social development and their mental and physical health [1]. School prepares youth for successful transition to adulthood [2], including economic and social participation in the community [3]. When youth are at school, they have access to academic, practical, and social-emotional learning opportunities. School attendance also provides shared socialisation experiences into cultural traditions and values of countries. This is facilitated via the curriculum (e.g., history and civics) and the routines and responsibilities inherent to school attendance (e.g., getting up in the morning to arrive at school on time; norms for conduct during school-time). The high value placed on education is longstanding. Three decades ago Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child proclaimed that education is a right of every young person and that measures will be taken to encourage school attendance [4].

Absenteeism and SAPs are highly concerning. They are associated with poor academic achievement [5-8]; impaired social-emotional development [7, 9]; mental health problems [10, 11]; substance use and other high-risk behaviours [12; 13]; and school drop-out and subsequent unemployment [14]. Absenteeism also places a burden on teachers to help students catch up on missed learning opportunities [15], it negatively influences teacher morale [16], may result in reduced school funding [17], and costs society in the form of lower completion rates and reduced productivity [18].

National studies reveal concerning rates of absenteeism (e.g., New Zealand [19]; United Kingdom [20]; United States [21]). Strikingly, longitudinal data reveal sustained or increasing rates of absenteeism (e.g., Denmark [22]; Japan [23]; United States [24]). Less surprising but equally concerning is the fact that absenteeism is associated with poverty [25], hunger [26, 27], and lower socioeconomic status [28], underscoring the special needs of low-income families, communities, and countries. Balfanz and Byrnes [29] suggested that youth reared in poverty have the most to gain from school attendance.

In this Letter to the Editor we describe the formation of INSA and draw attention to its broad mission, specific objectives, and guiding principles. Next, we specify three challenges that have hampered efforts to promote optimal school attendance, reduce absenteeism, and resolve SAPs. We conclude with a summary of activities INSA is currently undertaking to address these challenges.

Formation, Mission, and Objectives of the International Network for School Attendance

INSA was formed on March 16th 2018 by its 21 founding members (authors of this Letter) who participated in a week-long Lorentz Center Workshop in Leiden, the Netherlands. The title of the workshop was *School Absenteeism – Universal Problem Seeks Gold Standard Solutions*. The need to convene an international interdisciplinary Lorentz Center Workshop was identified by its organisers (authors DH, CG-G, MGL, and GM) who wished to establish a formal entity to improve responses to absenteeism via a holistic approach. The 21 participants from 11 countries included nationally and internationally acclaimed academics and clinicians as well as junior academics and clinicians, all of whom were selected based on prior and/or prospective contributions to the field of school attendance and absenteeism¹. Their disciplines included education, psychiatry, psychology, social work, and sociology.

The formation of INSA at the workshop's conclusion represents a significant milestone. For more than a century, many of the people working to promote attendance and reduce absenteeism were isolated in their endeavours.

Following the workshop, INSA's founding members honed the mission, specified objectives, and outlined its guiding principles (<https://insa.network/about-insa/mission>). Broadly stated, INSA's mission is to promote school attendance and reduce absenteeism, by compiling, generating, evaluating, and disseminating information, assessment, and intervention strategies. Its specific objectives are: (1) to ensure all stakeholders have access to current scientific and practical developments in the field; (2) to share data from research and best practice; (3) to connect and mentor junior researchers and practitioners; (4) to convene annually at different international locations; and (5) to document deliberations in the field.

Diverse principles guide INSA's pursuit of its broad mission and specific objectives. INSA will: ensure that its activities are informed by stakeholder input (students, families, schools, communities, practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers); encourage rigorous, interdisciplinary research and practice that emphasises individual, family, school, community, and cultural factors associated with school attendance and absenteeism; develop and test conceptual models to advance understanding of school attendance and absenteeism; develop and test assessment methods as well as prevention and treatment interventions; foster international collaboration to enhance attention to cultural factors and achieve consistency in conceptualising, classifying, and communicating about attendance problems; and promote research-informed policy and practice at local, national, and international levels. In these ways, INSA seeks to address the challenges that have plagued progress in promoting school attendance, reducing absenteeism, and resolving SAPs.

¹ We use 'field of school attendance and absenteeism' to refer to all scientific and practical efforts to promote school attendance, reduce absenteeism, and resolve SAPs.

There are many challenges that need to be overcome. The authors identified three key challenges that demand INSA's initial attention: (1) lack of consensus; (2) inadequate attention to the voices of all stakeholders; and (2) sub-standard dissemination and implementation.

Challenges in Promoting Attendance and Reducing Absenteeism

Consensus

School attendance and absenteeism are multifaceted, intersecting the experiences of youth, parents, schools, communities, organisations, and legal contexts. The study of attendance and absenteeism needs to embrace an interdisciplinary conceptualisation. However, typical of early attempts to understand a problem, the long history of practical, scientific, and scholarly work on absenteeism occurred mostly in the separate disciplines of psychology (e.g., [30]), medicine/psychiatry (e.g., [31]), social work (e.g., [24]), sociology (e.g., [32]), education (e.g., [33]), juvenile justice (e.g., [34]), and cultural politics (e.g., [35]). This contributed to: (a) a lack of consensus on definitions and classification; (b) uncertainty about timing of intervention; and (c) the lack of a shared research agenda. We address each of these in turn.

Establishing consistent definitions and related classification systems for SAPs has been elusive. No universally agreed upon classification currently exists despite multiple lines of evidence suggesting that SAPs can be meaningfully differentiated by function and type. For example, Kearney and colleagues developed a functional model of absenteeism (e.g., [36-38, 30]) suited to emerging SAPs. The functional model continues to evolve, now covering a broader range of school- and family-related functions [39]. Heyne and colleagues [40] recently provided a summary of century-long developments in the conceptualisation of SAPs. Four types labeled school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal, and school exclusion appear to be associated with different contributing factors, suggesting the need for differential approaches to prevention and management. The multiple lines of evidence related to functions and types of SAPs need to be integrated in a holistic classification system.

The field lacks clear benchmarks to indicate when to intervene [41, 42]. Some researchers suggest that there is no safe level of absence [8] and others suggest that *initial* intervention can occur at a threshold of 1, 3, or 5 percent absence (e.g., [42]). Still other researchers use a different criterion, namely 10 percent, while acknowledging the lack of empirical support for the criterion [41]. In addition, there is disparity around when to employ *intensive* intervention, such as at 10 or 15 percent absence [42] or 20 percent absence [41]. Consensus on the time-frames for measuring absenteeism is also lacking (e.g., past week, two weeks, month, or school term), although frequent monitoring of absenteeism is recommended [43, 44]. Moreover, meta-analyses of interventions for school refusal [45] and truancy [46] indicate that different interventions are applied *within* each type of absenteeism, exacerbating confusion about how best to intervene.

The lack of a shared research agenda stems from the history of work taking place within, rather than across disciplines. Some authors [47-50] have proposed interdisciplinary and risk factor models of

SAPs that could inform a shared research agenda, but widespread uptake of these models in research remains elusive. Sometimes interdisciplinary interventions are reported (e.g., [51-53]) but these are the exception rather than the rule. New interdisciplinary and bioecological models for research on absenteeism have emerged [28, 54] but efficient and effective dissemination and implementation will be needed to ensure uptake within a shared research agenda. Such models can help inform the development of multilevel assessment and intervention protocols. These protocols could foster a more standardized approach to measuring broader intervention outcomes (e.g., school engagement; family functioning) beyond the measurement of school attendance [55].

Stakeholder Voices

As noted, attendance and absenteeism are multifaceted, demanding an interdisciplinary approach to fully understand these phenomena and effectively respond to absenteeism and SAPs. The first-hand experiences of primary stakeholders – youth, parents, and education professionals – inform a fully interdisciplinary approach. Qualitative studies based on interviews with stakeholders constitute an important method to gather stakeholder voices. Only a small number of qualitative studies have been conducted, mostly in the fields of psychology and education, and often with very small samples.

Wilkins [56] interviewed four youth to examine motivation for attending a special program addressing school avoidance. Only youth without a disability were chosen for interview, despite the need to better understand absenteeism among youth with disabilities [54]. Baker and Bishop [57] interviewed four young people to understand from their perspective the reasons for their extensive absenteeism. In a somewhat larger study, Dahl [58] captured the voices of 34 young adults who previously truant from school, to better understand individual and contextual factors associated with truancy. More recently, Keppens and Spruyt [59] gathered the lived experiences of 20 truanting adolescents to understand the development of persistent truancy.

A few studies have included the voices of parents. Place and colleagues [60] interviewed the families of 17 adolescents who displayed school refusal, to learn about influences acting upon youth fearful of attending school. Gregory and Purcell [61] interviewed 5 youth absent from school, and their mothers, in relation to concerns and experiences. Havik and colleagues [62] interviewed 17 parents of youth displaying school refusal to gain their perspective on school factors associated with school refusal. Most recently, Dannow and colleagues [63] interviewed 3 youth with anxiety-related absenteeism, along with their mothers and fathers, about individual, relational, and school factors associated with absenteeism.

Across a slowly growing number of studies the voices of professionals have been elicited. Reid conducted much of the ground-breaking work in the UK, publishing accounts of interviews with head teachers from primary, junior, infant, and nursery schools, including special schools [64], as well as head teachers, deputy heads, middle managers, and form tutors from secondary schools [65]. Managing

absenteeism was found to be complex, time-consuming, and sometimes non-systematic. Using questionnaires and interviews, Reid [66] conducted a large-scale examination of the views of education social workers about the management of absenteeism. Many professionals held views at variance with government strategies. Three other UK studies were reported recently. Finning and colleagues [67] interviewed 16 secondary school educational practitioners about their experience working with youth displaying SAPs. SAPs were described as resource intensive and emotionally challenging. Tobias [68] interviewed 19 family coaches to identify factors helping and hindering return to school after absence. Absent youth felt invisible, which exacerbated their situation. Kljakovic and Kelly [69] interviewed 14 professionals working with youth displaying SAPs. The authors acknowledged their own lack of attention to cultural and ethnic factors when eliciting the perspectives of professionals. In one of the few studies conducted outside of the UK, Gren Landell and colleagues [70] surveyed almost 160 Swedish primary school teachers in regular and special education, to gain their views on risk factors for SAPs. Teachers' views were held to be important given the amount of time they spend with students.

The most comprehensive study to date incorporated the views of UK youth, parents, teachers, and others working closely with youth, such as professionals in local education authorities [9]. It addressed the causes of absenteeism and interventions employed to reduce absenteeism. Interviews were conducted with almost 150 education professionals and over 500 secondary school youth, and questionnaires were administered to primary school youth and parents. Differences were observed in the reasons given for absenteeism. Parents and youth emphasised school-related factors and education professionals focused more on parental attitudes and the home environment. These differences underscore the importance of obtaining the perspectives of all stakeholders. Other large questionnaire-based studies capturing youths' perspectives of factors related to absenteeism are starting to take place outside the UK, such as Norway [71], Germany [72], and Turkey [73].

Contemporary models for understanding and reducing absenteeism will be enhanced by the voices of all stakeholders: youth who display little or no absenteeism, youth who are absent, parents, education and helping professionals, policy-makers, and representatives of specific cultural and indigenous (first nation) groups. These voices can also inform initiatives such as the development of support groups; resources and interventions for schools, clinics, and communities; evaluation studies; and a shared research agenda. Fortunately school-based stakeholders are starting to be included in the development of systems for early identification of absenteeism (e.g., [74]). Because of the continually changing nature of service provision [66], the voices of professionals need to be elicited on a regular basis.

Dissemination and Implementation

Dissemination refers to the targeted distribution of information and intervention materials to specific audiences, while implementation refers to active promotion of the adoption and integration of evidence-based practices, interventions, and policies [75].

Sub-standard dissemination across and within disciplines likely contributed to the lack of consensus described earlier. For example, even in the related disciplines of psychology and psychiatry, different terms continue to be used to refer to absenteeism associated with emotional distress (e.g., school refusal, school avoidance, school reluctance; [40]). Dissemination of information across countries is also sub-standard. For example, the type of absenteeism referred to as school withdrawal has a long history in English-language literature but only recently has this type of absenteeism been discussed in the Japanese literature [76]. National and international data on types of absenteeism such as school refusal and school exclusion are rare, perhaps because all types of absenteeism are often conceptualised and reported as truancy [40]. As a result, there is no information about the prevalence of different types of absenteeism to signal areas of greatest need. Moreover, there has been no international repository of information on school attendance and absenteeism. Ultimately, this hampers our understanding of socio-cultural differences and determinants of SAPs.

A promising example of implementation is seen in multi-tiered system models [77] such as the Response to Intervention model (RtI; [78, 79]). The RtI model outlines various levels of support to promote school attendance and reduce school absenteeism, including preventive interventions at Tier 1, early interventions at Tier 2 for emerging and acute absenteeism, and more intensive interventions at Tier 3 for chronic and severe absenteeism. The model appears to have some traction (e.g., [42, 80-82]). The adoption of the model may stem from its perceived practical relevance for education and mental health professionals who need to make decisions about intervention. However, multi-tiered system models for youth with SAPs remain in development because many youth display extreme levels of absenteeism that may require special, wraparound interventions [83]. Some youth with severe and chronic school refusal evidently respond to clinic-based cognitive-behaviour therapy (e.g., [84]), calling for greater synthesis of empirically-supported interventions for specific types of SAPs within multi-tiered system models.

The implementation of evidence-based frameworks is inevitably a complex and multilevel process that requires explicit identification of barriers to adoption [85]. The contemporary field of implementation science, increasingly applied in schools, is focused on identifying specific strategies to address barriers and improve implementation outcomes such as adoption, high-fidelity delivery, and sustained use [86]. Implementation of frameworks such as the RtI model for school absenteeism may benefit from the deliberate selection of implementation strategies that demonstrate the greatest feasibility and importance in schools [87].

Conclusion

We believe that INSA's initiatives are the start of transformative change that will lead to improved school attendance and associated benefits for all school-aged youth around the globe. INSA's founding members are preparing a position paper promoting international consensus for operationalising and differentiating SAPs. INSA's inaugural Conference in October 2019 has the theme *School*

absenteeism: A universal problem in need of local, national, and international solutions

(www.insaconference.com). The more than fifty contributions from across 12 countries will include the voices of youth and parent representatives. INSA hosts a website (www.insa.network) which currently receives contributions from 14 countries (<https://insa.network/my-country>). This repository will broaden and hasten the dissemination of information relevant to science and practice.

The achievement of INSA's mission and objectives hinges upon the input of new members willing to share their voice and vision; collaborate in the development and pursuit of a shared agenda; secure support from national and international funding bodies; participate in national and international conferences and webinars; contribute to their country's space in the INSA website; and engage in mentoring between senior and junior scientists and practitioners. Membership is open to everyone committed to improving school attendance; it is not necessary to have an academic background (<https://insa.network/membership>). Through the work of its members, INSA endeavours to establish school attendance and absenteeism as a field of study.

Keywords: International Network for School Attendance; school attendance; school absenteeism; school attendance problem; consensus; dissemination; implementation; stakeholders

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